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CHRIST'S CALL TO BUSINESS MEN

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"And no man putteth a piece of undressed cloth upon an old garment: for that which should fill it up taketh from the garment, and a worse rent is made. Neither do men put new wine into old wine-skins: else the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins perish: but they put new wine into fresh wine-skins, and both are preserved" (Matt. 9:16, 17).

This passage from Matthew calls attention to a much neglected element in the teaching of Jesus. It has become a commonplace of the modern interpretation to claim that the method of Jesus is purely spiritual; that he aims at redeeming society by changing the total spirit of humanity and that he does this through individual conversion; that he is more interested, therefore, in character than in environment, and in motives rather than in institutions. But this modern emphasis on the spiritual nature of Christ's method arose in revolt against the extreme and very external ecclesiasticism of the church in bygone days—against the tendency to identify religion with outward observances and creedal dogmas and church institutions. Like most revolts, however, it has gone to the other extreme and come perilously near to reducing the beautiful Christian ethic to a pious sentiment that operates in a vacuum and consequently achieves nothing.

We have forgotten the splendid balance and sane practicality of our

Lord's teaching. In these words he is explaining to the Pharisees that the new wine of the gospel is too strong for the old institutions. Fasting was a prominent custom in Jewish religious life, but the rapture of the Kingdom of God was bound to burst it as new wine bursts an old skin. It became imperative, therefore, that a new custom should be formed if the precious wine were not to be spilled and lost.

It is my solemn and earnest contention that the Christian ethic of joy and beauty and love has become spilled and spoiled and lost for our day and generation by our refusal to provide for it an adequate social wine-skin or system. Consider how diffuse and aimless and largely ineffective are our church activities! The wine ferments strongly enough—is good enough in itself. We still generate the "right spirit," but it flows forth into a system so full of rents and holes and resistances that its quality is immediately diminished and its power dissipated. And the restlessness in Christian souls engendered by that unhappy condition is breaking the old institutions—is rending the old garments and wine-skins. It is only with a constant and pathetic struggle that we keep any pretense of shape or usefulness in them at all. *Let us be warned of Christ ere it be too late.*

It is not as though this were an isolated passage of Christ's teaching. Although we find him using the old

institutions to the best of their provision, nevertheless, it is obvious that he expects nothing less than a vast change in the system about him. All through the narrative you find Jesus believing that his gospel involves the sharpest challenge to the existing forms of society. He made a certain use of synagogue and the Temple, yet he knew them for institutions that would pass away.

"Neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem," he declared to the woman of Samaria. Seated one day amid the Temple buildings and looking round upon them he declared, "Verily there shall not be left one stone upon another." Is it by any means clear that he was thinking only of his resurrection when he said, "I will destroy this temple and in three days I will build it again"? Was he not thinking also of the new worship that should supplant the old?

One great conception of his we cannot escape, for it fills the New Testament—the "end of the world." How sadly we have misunderstood that phrase! We have taken it all too often to mean the end of the globe—the destruction of the earth. The Greek word for world should have saved us from such a blunder. "Cosmos" has regained in our time its old meaning of order or system. St. Paul even uses it in certain phrases (Gal. 4:2) to describe the Mosaic code or religious observance. Perhaps the word "epoch" is as good a translation as any. In this sense of the word there are repeated "ends of the world." Humanity is bound to organize its life, and until it organizes its "world" on Christian principles it can erect only "insubstantial fabrics" that must fall one by one till the Kingdom of God

brings the series to a triumphant close. The commercial interest is a useful one for punctuating this story of repeated failure. The epoch of slavery came to its end. The epoch of feudalism came to its end. The epoch of industrial competitive confusion is now approaching its end. Every "world" must end at last, till God's world arrives.

It was then the end of the "present order of things," the present "system" of society to which Jesus looked forward. The "world," friendship with which the apostles assure us is "enmity to God," is not the terrestrial one, whose order and beauty and provision are so beneficent to us, but *the array of all those institutions of society which are organized in forgetfulness of God and are based on human greed.*

To those institutions the apostles as followers of Christ became enemies. "We must obey God rather than men," cried Peter, and in that declaration he challenged the whole system of Jewish morality and religion. What was the charge brought against Stephen, the first Christian martyr? Listen! "This man ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall *change the customs* which Moses delivered unto us." Stephen understood his Lord to require a new system.

I turn a few more pages of the Acts of the Apostles and discover that Paul and Silas are dragged before a tribunal for this reason: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also." Obviously they were men who would not compromise with the "system" of life about them.

I call to mind the old institutions that were attacked by those first Christians.

First of all there were the typical Jewish customs—fasting, circumcision, aloofness from Gentiles, observance of the Jewish Sabbath. This conflict cost the pioneers of our faith many severe privations and great hatred. The Jews everywhere became their most violent foes. But their attack upon the institutions of paganism cost them dearer still.

They refused to offer incense on the altar to the emperor as divine. For this many suffered torture and death. Many of the first Christians refused to fight in the Roman armies. As a friend remarked to me recently, "It is difficult to imagine St. Paul enthusiastic over the extension of the Roman Empire and losing his passion for all souls in Roman patriotism."

The gladiatorial shows were ended at last by Christian protests that cost a great deal to make.

Slavery was undermined by the opposition offered to its spirit by the early church. Many a Christian master freed his slaves at great financial loss, while thousands who retained their slaves learned to treat them as brothers in the Lord. Business for them was not one thing and religion another.

With regard to the fact that the Christian church did not end the institution of slavery more quickly, it is well to remember that there was no considerable or effective popular franchise in the Roman Empire. The Christians had no votes, no means of political pressure. Yet they accomplished wonders by the continual protest of their convictions and their lives. *How much greater is your responsibility and mine*

in view of our possession of the franchise and our power of political action.

All along the line, in spite of a true reverence for law, these brave pioneers of the Kingdom of God recognized that a *work of destruction* was inevitable. The new wine could not help corroding the old wine-skins. The Christians could not help calling for new "institutions."

We move down to later history. In the Reformation there was a fresh effervescence of the new wine of Christian liberty.

Our spiritual fathers did not argue—as some today would apparently do—that the "new wine" must do as best it can in the old wine-skin. New institutions sprang into being. New churches were formed which gave room and play to the newly revived Christian spirit. Was that movement wrong?

I take the verdict of Mr. H. W. Nevins in his history of *The Growth of Freedom*. He says, "We may say that as a rule wherever the sacerdotal side of Christianity has stood in the ascendant and the priesthood has insisted on ritual, the church has strengthened the predominance of authority whether in mental or political life. Liberty on the other hand has advanced, provided that the personal relations of the soul towards religion have been regarded as of the highest value for spiritual life." The new institutions preserved and furthered the new spirit. Without their aid to expression it would have been spilled and lost.

If, then, this has been the course of the best Christian history and of apostolic example, must we not agree that *Christ is equally the foe of all modern institutions that are alien to his spirit?*

He is the foe of that great and persistent institution of the world-system, war. Of that we are now all convinced.

What, then, shall we say of commerce?

After a long and varied experience in the endeavor to win men of the world for Christ and the church, I declare unhesitatingly that one of the most frequent objections they raise to such a step is *the difficulty they have in reconciling their business life with a true obedience to Christ*.

Repeatedly I have found men refusing to become church members because, so they declare, they are not prepared to risk the economic security of themselves and their families by a loyal adherence to the Christian temper and to Christian principles in business.

I appeal to you business men. Is it so or not? In a searching little book, *As Tommy Sees Us*, by the Rev. A. H. Gray, there is a whole chapter devoted to this problem. Five officers give to the author as their solemn verdict on the ordinary practices of the commercial world that one cannot be in business and be strictly a Christian. Have these men of the world more sensitive consciences concerning Christ's demands than the business men of our churches? Here is a challenge indeed to you business men who make a Christian profession.

Consider briefly two elements in the Christian ethic. The second commandment Jesus tells us is to "love one's neighbor as one's self." Is that possible in a competitive system of commerce? Is it feasible in a system where a commercial traveler simply has to get down the street quicker than his rival and capture as much as possible of the

trade and leave as little as possible for the other man? Do we all know how jealously traders watch each other? How the big trusts knock out without compunction or compensation the little concerns?

Or take the great Christian injunction to humility and meekness of spirit. Does that pay in business? Is it true or false that trade flows in the channels of self-advertisement, self-assertion, pride, and display? Does not the situation force men to fight for their own hand, to assert their own rights and prefer their own interest above that of others?

The attempt then to answer the simple question, "Am I obeying Christ?" forces the Christian to consider the system under which the world calls him to live and work. How can any of us claim to be really obeying him if we are acquiescing in, or bolstering up, or by indifference failing to alter, a system which places upon human nature so unnatural a strain of temptation to selfishness, greed, and knavery?

Is it not plain that only one of two courses lies open to the soul that would be loyal to Christ?

First, we may break personally, and at whatever cost to ourselves and loved ones, with all that is immoral and cruel in commercial practices. If we are going to be strictly loyal to Christ in this way, we must break not only with unjust practices, but *with hard and unkind ones, too*.

There are business men who pride themselves on their "justice," but who are more stony-hearted to the appeals of pity than many a pagan. The God of Efficiency is a very hard god to serve.

Well, the Christian will remember the law of love. He will remember the beatitude of mercy. He will, therefore, refuse to compete with others for a livelihood. He will refuse to gain by another's loss. The removal of his competition, or at least the blunting of its edge, may save another life from disaster. What is his duty as a Christian? Must he not withhold himself from injuring his neighbor?

Here then is one line of action. Some men have taken it and withdrawn from the struggle and have gone under for Christ's sake. Others only approximate to its perfect fulfilment by reducing their competition to the margin of a bare livelihood, and for Christ's sake they endure a lifetime of anxiety and financial worry.

All honor to these brave souls. They are the true apostolic succession indeed. Yet may there not be another way?

Second, the other alternative, and the one I would press, is *to recognize frankly that we are all enmeshed in a world-system of long and stubborn growth, and that mere individual attack upon it is bad strategy. We must unite in the name of Christ to attack and overthrow the world-system of our time.* Christ's call is to a church. He meant his church to be the collective resource and succor of the individual. Christian people must secure as speedily as possible unanimity of thought and action, and the simplest immediate focus of such unity is *the obvious immorality of the world's way of life.*

After all, our sin, our disloyalty to Christ, lies not so much in the things we do under the system's pressure. Why? We do them often from the

noblest motives, such as love of one's family. Our sin lies chiefly in *our mental acquiescence in the system, our spiritual homage to mammon.* This system, so evil in its essential principle of opposing men to each other instead of uniting them, is so familiar to us all that many Christian people even are still blind to its iniquity. They are blinded indeed by the "God of this world." The immediate and first great step to the church's recovery of the Kingdom of God is *a united mental break with the world-system.* Let it be known once more in the earth that Christian men of business, profession, or trade, are *enemies of the world*, and are determined to bring the world to an end that God's Kingdom may arise.

So long as the church clings to the old wine-skin her guilt remains. Let her reach forth the hand of faith for the new wine-skin and she shall live by her faith.

We must lift our responsibility for this matter *together*, and so I plead that our Christian business men should get together and pool their brains upon this urgent problem of how they can obey Christ in commerce.

Some of my friends have taken me to task for appealing to men of the classes and to employers to take this step. They tell me you are not sincere, that you have too much to lose, that I am wasting my time and breath, and should instead be flinging in my lot with labor. But I do not believe them. I believe, on the contrary, that you men are the only men who can really solve this problem. I believe that in many of your hearts there are great wistful yearnings to pull the life of us all square with the demands of our Divine Master,

that you aspire to live and die as not merely successful men of commerce, but much more—as true servants of Jesus Christ, master-builders of his kingdom. Well, what will you do?

Walter Rauschenbusch points out in one of his books that again and again stubborn systems of evil have only been broken by someone who knew the system from the inside and understood it from A to Z, with its weak and strong points. It was Paul the Pharisee who broke Pharisaism; it was Luther the monk who broke monasticism; it was Count Mirabeau the aristocrat who did so much for the French Revolution; it is Count Tolstoy the ex-officer who will yet prove the conqueror of militarism; it was John Gough the ex-drunkard who did most for the overthrow of alcoholism. Similarly it is to *you men who work the present system, whose hands are on its main levers, who occupy its strong places*—it is to you that in the name of him you worship I make this appeal. Come out on the Lord's side as foes of the world-system! Pool your ideas and energies for its overthrow and the establishment of a true reign of Christ! Nothing less is your duty.

To wait and wait till every soul is spiritually evangelized and convinced and abstractly perfect before you attack and attempt to change the system is to ignore the lessons of history, the plain challenge of these words of Christ, and the psychology of the human soul. *Man progresses not by idea alone, but by idea and institution working to and fro, in and out, in alternate reaction.* Man is never abstractly perfect, but always in conjunc-

tion with some environment. He has a body as well as a soul. *If a changed heart will change the world, when are you going to begin?* The changed heart yearns toward the changed city.

I know how hard this matter is for some of you, especially for the older men who are so burdened with the pressures and the responsibilities this present system has heaped upon them. I do not expect a great deal from men who have strength only just to carry on. But you young people! It is your problem especially. Some of you fought for a new world; it is yours for the making. Follow Christ and he will make it through you. It will take all your heroism and test all your wits. It may mean a fight—a fight here as elsewhere. But the campaign is going through. Will you join it and so fulfil your debt to Christ? Here is a real issue for you at last! Christ asks for new wine-skins. He calls for new institutions. Will you provide them, will you make common cause to build a new system?

Trumpeter, sound for the splendor of
God,

Sound the music whose name is law,
Whose service is perfect freedom still,
The Order august that rules the stars!
Bid the anarchs of night withdraw!
Too long the destroyers have worked
their will.

Sound for the last—the last of wars!
Sound for the heights our fathers trod
When truth was truth, and love was
love,

With a hell beneath and a heaven above.
Trumpeter, rally us, rally us, rally us,
On to the City of God.